The Mud and the Mirth

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The Mud and the Mirth: Marine Cartoonists in World War I.

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Any study of military history can lead one down a proverbial rabbit hole of subfields. This project started in much of the same way. The use of cartoons and comics to tell stories as a part of cultural history as well as to train the military is not a new concept; but given when comic books were first published in the late 1930s, the associated military-themed illustrations have become enmeshed in that era. It also helped that Stars and Stripes cartoonist William H. “Bill” Mauldin was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for one of his cartoons from the Italian front in 1945.1 As my own research into civilian-produced comic books as well as the military applications of the same continued, I looked at how specific conditions were depicted. What did military personnel think of the food? What did they think of their training? Did servicemen really have the perpetual focus on women or on alcohol? Additionally, how were minorities treated?

As I delved further into the cartoons of the Second World War, I became curious as to what, if anything was published during the First World War. This was the basis for this project, which was originally part of the Marine Corps History Division World War I Centennial Historical Symposium held in 2018. The cartoons from Stars and Stripes in World War I provided a starting point, but soon led to the discussion of what U.S. Marine Corps publications of the day offered humorous art in their publications. Much of the material researched came about by laboriously leafing through copies of the magazines. Whenever possible, the artists provided their rank and general location, but there were also some

civilian artists who supplied work that was Marine Corps themed and then republished in *Recruiters’ Bulletin*. Charles Gatchell’s poster “All in the Day’s Work” is one such example.

Given the age and condition of many of the published items, it is not surprising that if they exist in a physical copy, the books are often tattered or missing significant portions of the content. The material was often meant to last only a few months, after all, not decades. Fortunately, some intrepid souls have scanned or digitized copies, which has made research easier.\(^\text{2}\) It does not however, remove the commentary of different races from that time. Many of the cartoons presented here are of White Marines, with locals often depicted by way of common stereotypes of the day or in derogatory terms. The cartoons have been kept as they were originally produced to show the attitudes of the time, but they are at best insensitive toward others and at worst use bigoted language. These attitudes are also reflective of the fact that the U.S. military as well as much of American society was segregated during the time these illustrations were created. We, as a society, sometimes forget that integration in the U.S. armed forces did not occur until 1948, and in society—by law at least—in 1954.\(^\text{3}\)

The reader will notice frequent comments on patterns I discovered within the publications, which often came about through looking at the copies directly. For example, all of Abian A. “Wally” Wallgren’s cartoon strips appeared at the top of page seven of the eight-page newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, produced each Friday from 8 February 1918 until the middle of June 1919. Similarly, patterns generally developed when looking at the *Recruiters’ Bulletin* and the *Marines Bulletin*, although with less consistency. For example, many cartoons appeared on page 17 or page 23 in the *Recruiters’ Bulletin*, so logic implies that these pages were set aside for some sort of illustrative work.

These cartoons were analyzed by noting where the Marines—and the U.S. military as a whole—were fighting at the time. Some

\(^2\) The Print and Photographs Reading Room, Print and Photographs Division, Library of Congress is one such resource.

areas were not documented, partially due to conditions needed for publication, as well as theater of operations. When possible, I tried to look at general social or psychological conditions, but overall the content presented here offers more of a historical approach to the images.

While the material comes from consistent sources—*Stars and Stripes*, *Marines Magazine*, the *Recruiters’ Bulletin*, Wallgren’s book of reprinted cartoons, and a 1929 book produced after the war entitled *The Songs My Mother Never Taught Me*—there are no doubt other gems waiting to be discovered: trench papers, personal diaries and sketchbooks, or letters. These would likely come from personal recollections and not officially sanctioned publications, however.

For a comprehensive look at how military cartoons and comics have influenced and been influenced by the military, I would recommend Christina Knopf’s excellent study *The Comic Art of War: A Critical Study of Military Cartoons, 1805–2014, with a Guide to Artists* (2015). She cataloged much of the work through the various eras of the U.S. military, and while not complete, it is an excellent start.